

## Imaging another culture?

Comparisons about the subjectivity of the images between China and

West in the eighteenth and second half of nineteenth century

文化 想象?

形象比较: 中国和西方-18 世纪和 19 世纪下半叶

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## CERTIFICATION (认证)

I, Professor 宋平 (Song Ping) hereby certify that I have read this manuscript and recommend for acceptance by Xiamen University, a thesis entitled “Imagining another culture? Comparisons about the subjectivity of the images between China and West in the eighteenth and second half of nineteenth century” in fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts at Xiamen University, People’s Republic of China.

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## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

The research described in this Master of Arts Thesis was conducted under the supervision of Professor Song Ping Department of Chinese Culture and Anthropology, Xiamen University. I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given wherever reference has been made to the work of others. I also confirm that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree, diploma or any other qualifications at Xiamen University, People's Republic of China or other institutions.

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**Paloma Coronado**

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends and teachers.

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**Imaging another culture?**  
**Comparisons about the subjectivity of the images between China and West in the**  
**eighteenth and second half of nineteenth century**

Images, subjectivities, missionaries, Chinese gentry, Confucian tradition, Catholic tradition

**Abstract**

In the encounter between cultures an image about the other's culture is created and communicated. The elements that determine if the other's image is positive or negative are conditioned by the subjectivities of the communal, historical and cultural contexts of the subjects who create and use the image. The image and the uses of the images are never objective or static. This thesis examines the subjectivities of the creation and uses of images between China and the West in two different periods. First, it is the eighteenth century, the image of an ideal China and its transformations into a backward China. Second, it is during the second half of the nineteenth century, the image of an Imperialist West and its transformations into a Modern West. It evaluates the contexts of the subjects that produced those images: the Missionaries in the European case and the Chinese scholar-literati in the Chinese case. The contexts are the communal, historical and cultural backgrounds of their respective times. It concludes that despite the differences and particularities of each process, what they have in common is the impact of the image of the other's culture when transgressing the established tradition.

**想象不同文化是什么？**  
**比较中国和西方的形象在十八世纪和十九底世纪**

形象, 主观性, 传教士, 绅士, 儒家, 天主教

当两种文化相遇时，关于对方文化的形象就被创造出来，并传递给对方。那些决定对方形象是好是坏的因素是以那些创造并使用这个形象的主体的个人的历史与文化背景的主观性为条件的。这个形象以及对其的使用从来就不是客观或静态的。本文审查了中国和西方国家在两个不同时期对这种形象的创造与使用中的主观性。首先是 18 世纪，一个理想中国的形象以及向一个落后的国家的转变。其次是在 19 世纪的下半叶，一个西方帝国主义国家的形象及其向现代西方的转变。本文考察了产生那些形象的主体的背景：欧洲例子中的传教士与中国例子中的文人学士。背景就是他们各自所处时代的社会、历史与文化背景。本文的结论是：尽管这两个进程有它们的差别与特性，然而它们有一个共同点，那就是在与已有的传统决裂时都有来自另一种文化的形象的影响。

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## Introduction

During the Enlightenment period the European thinkers concentrated their debates in the legitimization, foundation and efficacy of the political status quo. Critical arguments developed during the eighteenth century toward the dominant tradition of that time, the Roman Catholic Church, planting the seeds of the European modernization process to be consolidated during the next centuries. The ideological changes that supported the revolutionary processes brought the creation of the nation- states. Either against the old regime (i.e. France) or the colonizer (i.e. United States), both the French and American Revolutions were examples of it. What was the relation between the Western Enlightenment and China?

China and the images about Imperial-Confucian China were important in the development of the Enlightenment ideas and therefore in the maturing of the narratives of modernization, also referred as ‘the project of modernity’. However, in the following century, when the Chinese nation under the rule of the Qing dynasty was beginning its emancipation process from the Confucian tradition it would be the West and the images about Modern West that will contribute in the complexity of Chinese modernization process.

Both encounters happened in different times (eighteenth and nineteenth century); both societies (Chinese and Western) had their particular historical background. Both were on the edge of the transformation of what will lead to modernity. In their respective historical turning points, the encounter with the other culture was crucial: the presence of the other, the images about the other and the uses of those images had an important role in the processes that eventually lead to the emancipation from their respective traditions: the Europeans from the Catholic and the Chinese from the Confucian.

In the European case, the image about China would be used to support the arguments of those who were critical against the established tradition. The Enlightened thinkers were developing new ideas about a system based in the human rationality instead of on a religious foundation. The elements of *reason* and *individualism* that would become the roots of a new ethos, will lead to the project of modernization that privileges science and democracy as its core values. In the maturing process of these principles that are still the core of Western culture, the European thinkers embraced an image of China as a model. It was the successful prove of a society grounded in a rationality that determined both its ethic and politics. All the elements of

the Confucian tradition were highly regarded by the Europeans as the ‘secret’ of the Chinese wealth and stability. An ethic based on reason; the bureaucracy system; the civil service examination among others, were the objects of their admiration.

In the case of nineteenth century the political, social and economical crisis of China and the Modernization process of the West, changed the perception of both Chinese and Europeans about China. The narratives that justified the colonialism in general and the image of a backward China in particular, were used to legitimize the Western encroachment started in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese society went through social, economic and political dramatic transformations along with the equally dramatic debates, controversies and disputes in the ideological realm. The struggle with the tradition added, in the Chinese case, an element that European Enlightenment didn’t have: China had to face the ideological and military invasion from the West. Therefore, the production and the uses of the images about the ‘other’ (the West) was (and still is) more complex than a simple binary schema of fascination/rejection.

A positive or a negative image about another culture leads to certain uses of the image itself. As a model to be emulated in the case of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, China’s image was an example of a society based on rationality. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, China’s image was an example of a backward society. Both images were used to support ideological arguments or justified military invasions. At the same time, and what is the common element in the encounter that in terms of cultural exchange took place in the moments of the rupture with the tradition in each societies (with a century of difference), was the impact the image of the “new” or “different” culture had on the emancipation process from the tradition. Different in its particularities both processes have one element in common: the image of the other and its impact in the emancipation from the status quo.

Historical and cultural backgrounds provide certain conditions that determine first, the encounter between two cultures, second, the creation of an image of the other’s culture, and third, its use. The image is never neutral; it is labeled by historical and cultural aspects that determine the subjectivity of the imagining action. This research is about bringing these subjectivities to the surface, to analyze and compare them in order to rethink the importance of the encounters between cultures in general, China and West in particular.

The cultural image about other culture is the general topic of this research. Its background is defined in the cultural exchanges that took place in two different times of

European and Chinese history. Each period marked a transition and a rupture with an established tradition and the maturing process of the ideas and values that are still part of our contemporary societies. Even if the tendency of the narratives of colonialism is to neglect the role that China played in the formation of the ideas of Enlightenment, recent publications are questioning those other time postures (Weber's and Marx's, for example) that positioned China as backward. Publications as those of Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004), Elman, *A cultural history of modern science in China* (2006), Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe* (1970) or Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000) are just few examples of the researches that are increasing the reevaluation of late imperial China's role in European and Chinese development itself.

The particular topic of this research is the subjectivity that was behind the construction of those images that China and Europe created respectively. The images themselves are not the object of this study neither the dilemmas of modernization. What is the object of my analysis is the comparison of the production of these images and its common element: the impact that they have on those particular times in the internal challenges of the status quo.

## **1. Relevance**

Among the geographical representations of the earth, two maps are widely used around the world. They both picture the surface of the earth divided by the same parameters (continents and countries) but they place them in two opposite ways: America or Asia continents can be on the right side depending on the map. As they have been used and diffused independently from the other, the common tendency is to take for granted each one's validity ignoring the other's one.

Both the maps we use to determine our origin place and the language we learn the first determine in a big scale the cultural elements that define us as member of certain culture. On the other hand, it is a geographical location what first labels the impressions we have when meeting another person. It is a normal reaction to feel closer to somebody that comes from same place than with someone who is not. Usually, when the encounter between two entities happens, there are two reactions: either rejection or inclusion. What it is behind these reactions?

We live in a world labeled by many categories that determine our cultures. Tracing a root from the geographical location and the language, the relations between individuals and cultures seem to be always biased by at least these two labels. The relation as inclusion or rejection of the other

depends on many factors that cannot deny the place and language of the other. How the encounter with the other does happen in a realm that goes beyond the individuals to entire societies? And how it goes through all the labels and categories that determine geographical, political, economical, linguistically, cultural representations of the world? Choosing an old binary –East and West- and a specific realm as an historic encounter, I will describe through this paper the transformation of some images about China and West that went from fascination to rejection and vice versa. What is the relevance of the analysis of the subjectivities in these particular historic encounters?

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were two periods of European and Chinese history that share these general characteristics:

- Both were the last part of a tradition that had been dominant; the status quo and its ideological legitimization were still in control, but their dominance was increasingly growing weak.
- Political, economic and social crisis were part of transformations that led to the intelligentsias of each society (18<sup>th</sup> European and 19<sup>th</sup> Chinese) to question each dominant tradition and to look for different values and answers to solve the dramatic situations.
- The contact with the ideas and values of the other culture offered not only a picture of a different system but the legitimization of the critical attitude toward the still dominant tradition.

The analysis of the subjectivities needs the background of the foundation of the images; and as both images were crucial in the critics against each tradition, the historical moment has to be that of the edge of the transformation: the moment when the crisis is in its peak and the transformations are imminent. That was the criteria to narrow the time period of this research, especially in regards with the Chinese process of imagining the West. The images about West will be a constant from the second half of the nineteenth century, but the end of the imperial China just happened once.

The historical perspective offers a distance of the facts and its interpretation that helps to put in evidence the subjectivities that are behind the way the history is told. Not only the historic narratives but also the production of the images about others is a process that cannot be totally independent or objective. Is in this sense that this research offers an analysis of the subjectivities



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